

THE COMMUNION IN CREICH PARISH, FIFESHIRE, 1761-1834

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THERE are not many opportunities now of seeing the Sacrament of the Lord's Supper celebrated in the old traditional Scottish custom, where the communicants sat, not in the pews as they do now, but at a table stretching from end to end of the church, with minister and elders at the head or in the middle, and the communicants seated facing each other. Undoubtedly there was a symbolism about the ordinance as then celebrated which to some extent we have lost in our present-day method. The main objection to the old way was the extraordinary length to which the services were drawn out. It does not take many people to fill the seats at a single table, even though that table be the length of the church; and consequently it had to be filled many times before the whole body of the communicants could be overtaken. We have to remember, too, that under the old method the Communion was celebrated only at long intervals, seldom oftener than once a year. When Communion Sunday did come round, almost every member of the congregation was present. With infrequent celebrations, it was the custom for communicants to attend the service in neighbouring parishes as well as in their own.

I

Of the old fashion of celebrating the Communion in the Fife parish of Creich there has been preserved a number of interesting details. These are contained in a small note-book of sixteen double pages, in which are given the details of the Communion Services for seventy-four years, from 1761 to 1834, both years inclusive. These pages are stitched into a coarse brown-paper cover, on which is written: "Particulars anent dispensing the Sacrament at Creich."

Michael Greenlaw, afterwards Doctor of Divinity, was ordained minister of Creich in 1755, and continued in office for sixty years till his death in 1815 in his 93rd year. He was succeeded by Alexander Lawson, who also had a ministry in Creich of sixty years, dying in 1875, Father

of the Church, in his 88th year. Out of the seventy-four years covered by the book fifty-five refer to Dr Greenlaw's ministry and nineteen to Lawson's.

As there were two ministers during the period, so were there two churches. The old pre-Reformation church was in use during almost the whole of the period, *i.e.* up to 1832, so that only the last two entries refer to the new church. The old church was a plain, oblong building, standing east and west, sixty feet long by fifteen broad, with the pulpit in the usual post-Reformation position about the middle of the south wall. The original door was on the south side near the west end, and another had been knocked out in the east gable. The Communion table therefore ran from east to west, with the minister in the middle of a long side. On the second page of the book is the direction: "Communicants are requested to enter to the tables by the East and to retire by the West."

The new church stands east and west, and is entered from a vestibule at the west end, with the pulpit in the east end, the interior being forty-five feet long by twenty-eight and a half broad. There were two passages, with the space between so seated that by a slight adjustment the pews of the ordinary service were converted into the Communion table with seats on either side, and the minister at one end, the east.

II

The whole book is in the handwriting of Lawson. The entries relating to the former ministry bear the mark of having been written at one time, and copied from some other source, apparently kept by Dr Greenlaw himself. The writing shows no signs of the irregularities of hand that are afterwards visible, when the record was kept from year to year.

There is an entry of some kind for every celebration during the years in question, except for 1813, 1814, and 1815. The last was the year of Dr Greenlaw's death, and it is possible that during the two preceding years there may have been no celebration. It is possible to check the accuracy of the details in some points, *e.g.*, as regards date, by the session minutes and accounts. There is only one discrepancy—in 1778—where the collection record shows the Sacrament a week later than the date given in the book.

The entries give not only the number of communicants and of tables, but even the amounts of bread and wine used. The first entry is dated 1761, but that for 1763 is more typical:—

Creich 1763, Nov. 1st Sabbath.—This day the Sacrament was dispensed. There were 131 tokens gathered. There were five tables, the last not above half full or thereby. One sixpence loaf served, the half of it not used.

There is no entry for 1762 : the Collection Book is confirmatory. In that year the Minister is stated to have gone to the wells for his health, and to have been absent on six Sundays, not all consecutive. Probably he did not feel fit for the fatigue of a Communion season. There are similar omissions for the years 1769 and 1775. In both those years it was the church that was at fault, as the collection record shows. On March 5, 1769, there was "no sermon, the day being rough and the kirk declared frail." On succeeding Sundays there was "no sermon for the same cause, the minister preaching in the neighbourhood." November 19 shows "no sermon, the kirk not yet roofed," : but by December 3 the entry reads : "Having got into the kirk there was collected . . ." In 1775 the interior of the building required attention. On September 17 the collection record runs : "no sermon as the kirk was to be new seated." On the three following Sundays there is the note : "Kirk not seated ; minister preached at Moonzie," *i.e.* the parish church between Creich and Cupar.

Sometimes Dr Greenlaw omitted to make his customary entry. For example : "year 1779 neglected to be marked," although the collection record shows the celebration on August 8. Again in 1810, "Dr Greenlaw had neglected to mark for 1810, but the Sacrament was dispensed, and he says there would be about 200 tokens distributed as there was no Sacrament at Flisk [the neighbouring parish on the north] that year." By that time the custom of marking each Sabbath's collection separately had been departed from, so that the Collection Book is no help. The session records for the same period are very meagre, recording only an occasional case of discipline.

A few more entries are quoted to show the nature of the details given—

8th June 1783 . . .—165 tokens distributed. 4 tables and 10 persons at a fifth as they had sat slack ; used 4 bottles of wine exactly and not nearly one loaf.

13th June 1790 . . .—170 tokens distributed. 5 tables, the last wanting about 6 persons. 5½ bottles of wine used, and less than half a loaf. The bread small at this time.

12th June 1796 . . .—189 tokens distributed. Four full tables and 20 at a fifth. Used 4½ bottles of wine, and not near a shilling loaf of bread. Wheat above 40^s per boll.

14th June 1801 . . .—187 tokens distributed. 4 tables full, 28 at a fifth. Used 4 bottles of wine : an eighteen pence loaf not nearly used. Wheat upwards of £3 per boll.

A comparison of the number of communicants with the number of tables shows that in the early years of the record the table held only about thirty persons, usually rather less. For example, in 1764 there were 130 tokens, five tables, the last half full. Once or twice the average rises above 30, *e.g.*, in 1767, when there were 170 tokens, five full tables, close packed, and seventeen at a sixth service. A change comes after

the re-seating of the old church in 1775, and the average jumps to forty, *e.g.*, in 1776, with 123 tokens and three tables. The conjecture is that advantage was taken of the reseating to ensure that some of the pews could, by certain adjustments, be used as a table, as was done later in the seating of the new church. This conjecture is confirmed by the fact that during these early years there is a regular payment to a wright for his services. For example, in 1763, under the distributions occurs the entry: "A wright for erecting and removing the Tables, and Nails," 14s. Scots. The new arrangement seems to have been capable of improvement: for the first two years a carpenter's help was evidently necessary. In 1776 the entry is: "To the wright for placing the communion Tables," 1s. sterling¹; in 1777, the last year of any such payment, it is: "To the wright for helping to set the Communion Tables," 10d. sterling. The improvement effected was seemingly such as dispensed for the future with any need for the help of a tradesman.

III

The numbers present at any one celebration vary from 113 in 1761 to 299 in 1771, the average number for the whole period being 180. The population varied from 375 in 1755 to 419 in 1831. The largest numbers occur in two successive years: in 1770, 284 tokens and nine tables were used; in 1771, the numbers were 299 and ten. There is no indication why those two years should have figures so large. It is probable that more than half must have come from outside the parish. The 1767 entry distinguishes between the local congregation and visitors—170 tokens were distributed, *viz.*, 120 in Creich and 50 to strangers. If the figure for Creich was a fair average for the parish—and the total number is sometimes not far above it—in the two big years there must have been over 150 from elsewhere. The fact that these numbers fall in successive years inclines one to believe that in both Dr Greenlaw must have been assisted by someone well known for his power of attracting crowds. Undoubtedly there were such ministers, the power of whose name brought numbers much beyond the ordinary.

Another point of interest is the hour at which the services were held. In accordance with the custom of the time there was service on three days in addition to the Sunday—the previous Wednesday (scarcely ever Thursday, as in days nearer our own time) being kept as a Fast Day, Saturday as the Preparation, and Monday as the Thanksgiving. A note at the beginning of the book reads: "Public worship on Sac^t Sabbath begins at half-past eleven o'clock." By Lawson's time the hour had

¹ The change in the accounts from Scots money to sterling took place in March 1774.

become earlier, for under date 1818 there is a note giving the hours on all the days: "Public worship began at 12 o'clock on the fast-day and on Monday; on Saturday at 1 o'clock: and on Sabbath at 11 o'clock—the interval on Sabbath, an hour and three-quarters." It cannot be stated at what point the interval occurred, whether the later tables were served after the interval, or whether there was an interval between the Communion Service proper and some kind of afternoon or evening service. The latter supposition is the more likely, though it draws out the services of the Sunday to an even greater length than was supposed. Under date July 8, 1832, the last occasion on which the Sacrament was celebrated in the old church, there is again mention of the interval: "It rained so much to-day after the forenoon service that the ladies from Parbroath and Balmeadowside remained in church during the interval which was two hours. We sent some slices of tongue and some apple-tarts to them. It is expected that the Sac^t has been dispensed in the old church to-day for the last time. The church was well filled in the afternoon notwithstanding the rain."

There are only two entries on the Sacrament in the present church. The date of the first Communion celebrated in the building is not entered, but the collection record supplies it—

14th July 1833 . . .—used nearly 4 bottles of wine. 210 tokens distrib^t; five tables full and about 12 or 14 at a sixth.

A side-note states that "three ministers and three elders communicated, making in all 216." *Three* ministers!—that is one of the points where the abandonment of the table system has wrought a change. Five tables meant usually ten addresses, as each table was as a rule addressed twice, once before they received the elements, and again ere they left the table. The mere mention of the number of addresses will indicate the need for more ministers than one. How did the visiting ministers supply their own pulpits? The answer is easy: they did not supply them, but shut their own church for the day in spite of repeated instructions from the General Assembly. Creich records, like those of other parishes, are full of Sundays when there was no collection, the minister being absent at a sacrament elsewhere.

IV

The season of the year in which the Sacrament was celebrated varies considerably, although there is no instance in the book of a service in any of the first five months of the year, but, beginning with June, every month is represented. In the early years it was usual to wait till harvest operations were over: the first seven entries are of dates in the end of

October or beginning of November. But in the record as a whole June and July are the favourite months, with more than half the total in June. In all the seventy-four years to which the book refers the Sacrament was never celebrated twice in any one year.

Silence is observed on the kind of wine used.

In the entries which refer to his own ministry, Lawson gives the names and addresses of those who, on each occasion, communicated for the first time, and in later years the names also of those who brought certificates—what we should now call “Disjunction” certificates—from other congregations.

The entry of the last year recorded is :

July 13th, 1834.—208 tokens. There were three ministers and three elders. There were 44 com^{ts} at the 1st and last tables, and upwards of 40 at each of the others.

The number of tables is not actually given, but must have been five.

There the record ends, although the book was not finished. There are a few blank pages left, and on the last there is a note of “intending communicants who have come for examination, June 1838.” Lawson no longer felt it necessary to continue the entries, though we are grateful for the preservation of the details of so many years. They may not have seemed of much interest at the time, but it is wonderful how much information they convey to succeeding generations.